

# REPORT

**DATE:** November 4, 2004  
**TO:** Regional Council  
**FROM:** Daniel Griset, Senior Regional Planner, (213) 236-1895, griset@scag.ca.gov  
**SUBJECT:** Salton Sea Authority Support Resolution

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S APPROVAL:

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## RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Energy and Environment Committee recommends that the Regional Council approve Resolution #04-455-1 supporting the Salton Sea Authority's Efforts to Identify and Implement Corrective Measures to Preserve the Beneficial Uses of the Salton Sea and urging early State and Local Cooperation on Action Plans and Funding.

## BACKGROUND:

The Salton Sea is a lake occupying a desert basin known as the Salton Sink. This body of water covers a surface area of 376 square miles, making it the largest lake in California. The Salton Sea has a unique make-up. By virtue of its location in the Colorado Desert ecosystem, an area with average annual precipitation of less than 3 inches per year, the Sea receives minimal inflow from rain. 90 percent of the entire inflow to the Sea is agricultural runoff from the Imperial, Coachella, and Mexicali Valleys. This inflow carries nutrients, such as phosphates and nitrates, which support the rich and abundant life in the Sea. The inflow also carries an abundance of salt (and thus the Sea's name).

### *The Sea's Challenges*

The very things that make this lake so unique and such a rich source of abundant life are placing the Sea's existence at risk. The nutrients that provide such an abundant source of food for fish are at levels that alter the available oxygen in the water. Its salt content may someday be so high as to compromise the reproductive ability of fish and, thus, their survival. Without fish, the hundreds of species of birds that rely on fish for food, and the economic status of the Sea as a productive fishery, would be threatened.

Its unique feature of being a shallow, closed basin renders it vulnerable to increases or reductions in inflows, which can dramatically change its elevation. The proposed transfer of water from the Imperial Valley to San Diego as part of the reduction of California's Colorado River use, the possible reclamation of New River water by Mexico, and the increased evaporation from the Sea's restoration all threaten to reduce lake levels. The result could be potential air quality problems caused by blowing dust, seaside homes stranded far from the Sea, and greatly accelerated concentrations of salts and nutrients.

### *Movement towards Restoration*

The Salton Sea Authority has recognized the Sea's challenges and has begun the restoration process, to not only sustain the Sea, but also revitalize it as an environmental and economic wellspring. The Salton Sea Authority, along with the U.S. Department of Interior's Bureau of Reclamation, has begun efforts to maintain the Sea as an agricultural drainage reservoir, restore the wildlife resources and habitats, stimulate recreational use, and provide an environment for economic development.

### *The Authority's Preferred Project Selection*

Following the development of alternative restoration plans the Authority selected a Preferred Project for support and funding. The process leading up to this selection is documented in the *Salton Sea Restoration Preferred Project Report* (an Executive Summary is available at [http://www.saltionsea.ca.gov/media/ppr\\_summary.pdf](http://www.saltionsea.ca.gov/media/ppr_summary.pdf)). The Report documents the process that resulted in the Authority's identification of a Preferred Project Alternative, including discussion of how the Sea could respond to inflow reductions and provision of restoration options according to the program objectives authorized in the Salton Sea Restoration Reclamation Act of 1998.

This Preferred Project Alternative involves construction of a mid-sea barrier that would divide the Sea into two marine areas. The northern area would be maintained to achieve lower salinity levels while the southern area would become increasingly saline by design. As water reclamation occurs, the residual salts would be accumulated in the more saline water body. Water inflows from the New and Alamo Rivers would be managed to support a variety of wetlands, habitats and fishing areas at the edges of the southern area.

The objectives of the Preferred Project Alternative are summarized as follows:

- Permitting the continued use of the Salton Sea as a reservoir for irrigation drainage,
- Reducing and stabilizing the overall salinity of the Salton Sea,
- Stabilizing the surface elevation of the Salton Sea,
- Reclaiming, in the long term, healthy fish and wildlife resources and their habitats, and
- Enhancing the potential for recreational uses and economic development of the Salton Sea.

Another important consideration in the restoration of the Sea is the role the state has through its financial obligations in the Quantification Settlement Agreement (QSA) reached in 2003 between various water, state and federal agencies. The QSA set up the terms for the transfer of Colorado River water from farms in the Imperial Valley to urban consumers in San Diego County. Within these terms, the QSA linked the Sea's restoration to the management of water resources in the Coachella and Imperial Valleys.

Because of the state's financial obligations (defined both in the QSA and other agreements) it has a key role in determining what corrective actions are to be taken for the Sea's restoration. This added level of study and decision making is a matter of concern for the Authority, a regional joint powers authority with broad governmental representation and participation. The Authority has voiced concern about the effect of the state's planning and policy process, especially the potential for duplications of effort and needless delays in getting Sea restoration efforts underway. Even with the

state's role in project approval and funding, the Authority seeks an affirmation of its role as the lead agency in matters relating to planning and implementation of Salton Sea restoration measures.

Staff has prepared a resolution that addresses these concerns and recognizes the need for continuous cooperation between the Authority and other funding partners in a timely selection of a final action plan for restoration of the Sea. With the selection of an action plan that has the support of the Authority and the state, the prospects will immediately improve for realizing a long-awaited vision of the Salton Sea as one of the region's valued environmental resources.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** SCAG's adoption of the recommended resolution will have no fiscal impact on SCAG. The staff expense related to work on these water issues is supported by funding from work element 05-320. *tc*

DOCS #104038 v1

**RESOLUTION No. 04-455-1**

**A RESOLUTION OF  
THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF GOVERNMENTS  
IN SUPPORT OF  
THE SALTON SEA AUTHORITY'S ROLE AS THE LEAD AGENCY IN  
IDENTIFYING AND IMPLEMENTING CORRECTIVE MEASURES TO  
PRESERVE THE BENEFICIAL USES OF THE SALTON SEA**

**WHEREAS**, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) is the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for six counties: Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ventura;

**WHEREAS**, the Salton Sea is California's largest inland water body with beneficial uses including fisheries and wildlife habitat, recreation, and preservation of endangered species.

**WHEREAS**, the Salton Sea ecosystem is a critical link on the international Pacific flyway and supports a productive fishery and over 300 species of birds.

**WHEREAS**, with the loss of wetlands areas within California, the Salton Sea ecosystem has become an even more important ecological resource.

**WHEREAS**, the Sea is threatened by increasing salinity and water loss.

**WHEREAS**, the Salton Sea Authority is a joint powers agency chartered by the State of California in a Joint Powers Agreement on June 2, 1993 and serves as the local lead agency for identifying and implementing corrective measures to preserve the beneficial uses of the Sea.

**WHEREAS**, the Salton Sea Authority is comprised of Riverside County, Imperial County, Imperial Irrigation District, and the Coachella Valley Water District, with pending full membership by the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Tribe. It's ex-officio members include the Southern California Association of Governments, the Imperial Valley Association of Governments and the Coachella Valley Association of Governments. It has cooperative relationships with the Federal lead agency, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the United States Geological Survey Salton Sea Science Office, and the University of Redlands. It has worked closely on restoration efforts with the Regional Water Quality Control Board, regional universities, the Salton Sea Environmental Coalition, and many state, federal and local agencies.

**WHEREAS**, the Salton Sea Authority has made a concerted effort to collect all known suggestions for remediation of the Salton Sea and has subjected these proposals to formal review against specified criteria. The Salton Sea Authority has implemented, with various partners, projects and programs to improve wildlife health, the fishery, water quality and the aesthetic environment of the area. The Authority also is taking concrete steps in

preparing for the detailed planning of a remediation project known as its Preferred Project Alternative.

**WHEREAS**, recent State legislation linked to the Colorado River Quantification Settlement Agreement (QSA) recognizes the Salton Sea as a critical environmental issue to be addressed and provides up to \$50 million in Proposition 50 funds and approximately \$300 million from the sale of water that would otherwise flow to the Sea for that purpose.

**WHEREAS**, in response to the recent state QSA legislation, the State of California is implementing a new Salton Sea Restoration process funded by Proposition 50 funds.

**WHEREAS**, the Salton Sea Authority Board of Directors has expressed concerns that another State planning process will potentially duplicate efforts, waste resources, and delay selection of a preferred project design.

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** by the Regional Council of the Southern California Association of Governments, that SCAG does hereby support the Salton Sea Authority in its role as the lead agency for developing and implementing measures to preserve and restore the beneficial uses of the Sea.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that SCAG urges the State to join the Salton Sea Authority, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Salton Sea Science Office and other key stakeholders to coordinate planning efforts and minimize unnecessary delays in selecting a final plan of action for stabilizing the long-term future of the Salton Sea ecosystem.

**APPROVED AND ADOPTED** by the [vote] of the Regional Council of the Southern California Association of Governments at a regular meeting on this 7<sup>th</sup> day of October, 2004.

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RON ROBERTS  
President, SCAG  
Councilmember, City of Temecula

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Mark Pisano  
Executive Director, SCAG

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Karen Tachiki  
Chief Legal Counsel, SCAG